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ABSTRACT

Written for children, this story is one in a series about the history of the Blackfeet from the precontact period to the mid-nineteenth century. The story begins when the tribe first encounters gunfire in a battle with the Plains Cree, then their neighbors to the east. A Blackfeet warrior is killed and the others return home to tell the chiefs and medicine men about the powerful thunder medicine of the Crees. The Blackfeet determine to capture this weapon and are successful, but many winters pass and they cannot make it work. Finally, Chief Na-mak-an, proposes that they make peace with the Crees and, in return, learn to use their thunder medicine. The Blackfeet not only learn to load and fire their weapon but are given more guns by the Crees, who get them from white men on the Assiniboine River, trading 50 beaver skins for each gun. With the great medicine of the loud mouthed gun the Blackfeet drive the Crow south to the Yellowstone, raid many tribes, and gain and hold a vast country even after all their enemies are equally well armed. (JHZ)

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The Loud Mouthed Gun

by

James Willard Schultz

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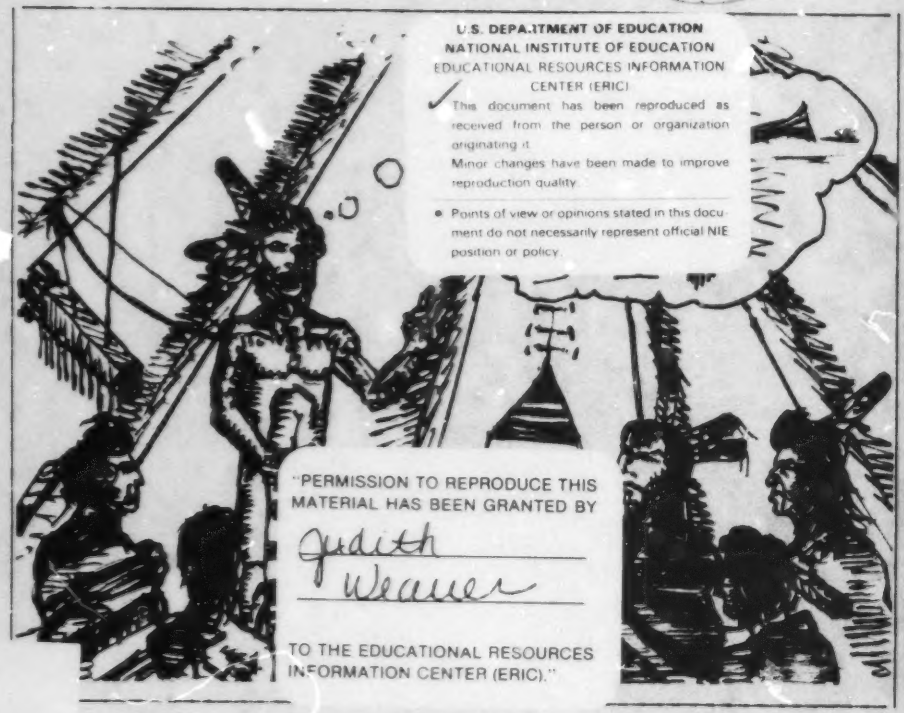

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THE LOUD MOUTHED GUN

as told by Red Eagle

to

James Willard Schultz

edited by Jon Allan Reyhner

illustrated by Shawn Running Crane
and Rusty Tatsey

Council for Indian Education

Billings, Montana

and the

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Heart Butte, Montana

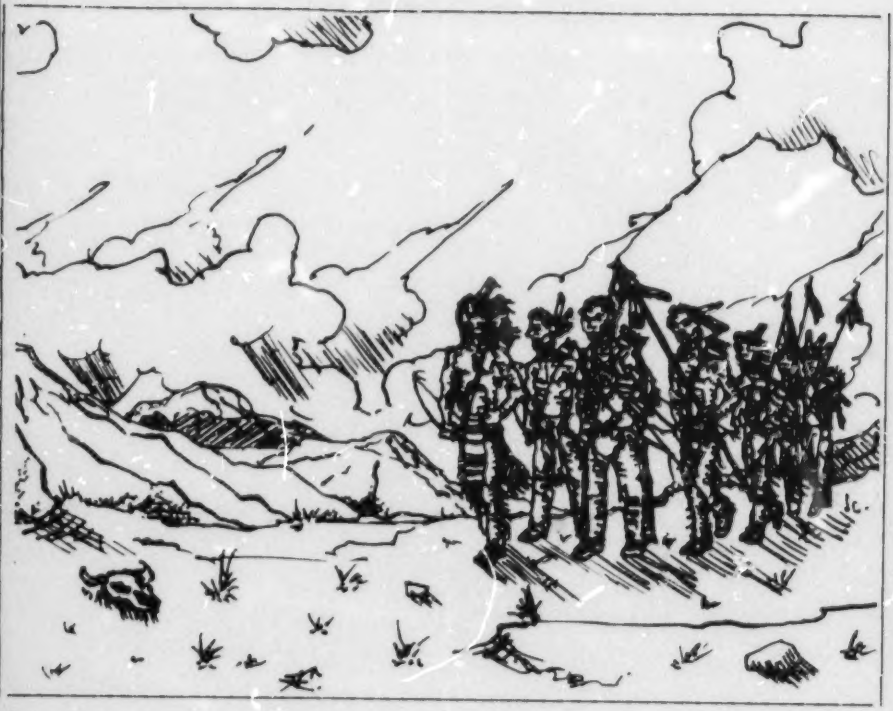
1984

THE LOUD MOUTHED GUN

by James Willard Schultz

In the very long ago the Blackfeet did not own the country they own now. It was Crow country. The country of the Blackfeet was far to the north. It lay from the Saskatchewan south to the Milk River and from the Rocky Mountains eastward five or six days journey on horseback. On the north and east the tribe was hemmed in by the Woods and Plains Crees. On the south the Crows held their own against us.

Once, in a time before this time I shall speak of, the Crees and the Blackfeet were on friendly terms. But they fell out about a woman, and there was bitter war between them. And so it was that one spring a large party of young Blackfeet warriors started out for a raid in the Plains Cree country. Before they left--of course--they had a medicine sweat bath, and an old medicine man prayed for them. As they were leaving camp he gave them a warning. He said, "Remember that the Crees have one strong medicine man. His is the thunder medicine. Look out for him."



The war party travelled eastward for many sleeps.

The war party travelled eastward for many sleeps. Then one day they discovered a small party of Crees ahead. They were evidently bound for a raid into Blackfeet country. Our leader said, "Ha! They are not so many as we, and, anyhow, the Blackfeet are the best fighters. Come on, let's charge them."

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He no sooner said the word, than the charge was started. As soon as the Crees saw the Blackfeet they turned and ran. They took refuge on the top of a small round hill. Arriving near the foot of the hill, the Blackfeet counseled together. They could, of course, surround the hill and just wait until the enemy would be forced from want of water to come down and fight on level ground. But most of the party were too impatient for that. It was decided to rush the place from all sides.

As they stood talking, they noticed that one of the Crees had something in front of him that glittered in the sun like ice and certain rocks. But they paid little attention to it. They moved to the foot of the hill. Suddenly, at the top of the hill, there was a boom of thunder and a puff of smoke. With a yell of pain, one of the Blackfeet fell over dead. His comrades cried, "The thunder medicine man!" And they ran and took shelter in a timber belt on the north side of the hill. There they counseled again.

They got so angry at the death of their friend that they made a rush up the hill as fast as they could go. Again thunder boomed

As they stood talking, they noticed that one of the Crees had something in front of him that glittered in the sun like ice and certain rocks.

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at the top. Another of the party fell. They dragged him down into the brush. He was dead. There was a small hole clear through his body. "Friends," said the leader, "it is no use for us to try to take that hill. Up there is the thunder medicine Cree. We were warned against him." At that they hid their dead and took the back trail home.

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Arriving in camp, they told what happened. The chiefs and medicine men at once called a big council. They at first doubted the news brought them. One of the camp sun priests had a thunder medicine. But all he could do was to pray to the thunder bird. He would ask it to bring the rains so that the berries might grow plentiful and sweet. It did not seem possible that any one could actually handle thunder and kill with it. Everyone of the returning party insisted, however, that their description of what had happened was wholly true. They realized that unless the Blackfeet could get this powerful medicine from the Crees, the tribe would be driven from the country. The head chief said,

> "We must, regardless of our lives, make one great effort to secure that medicine. No doubt the war party carrying it is now on its way here. As you love your women and little ones, your old fathers and mothers, go forth you fighting men and take it, or die."

The warriors took his words. They made preparations. The medicine men prayed for them. They went eastward in different bands

They went eastward in different bands to look for the party of Crees.

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to look for the party of Crees.

Surely the sun heeded the prayers of those ancient medicine men. One of the Blackfeet parties discovered the enemy. They were in a thicket of willows beside a little stream. They were cooking meat of a buffalo they killed. The Blackfeet sneaked as close

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to them as they could. On being discovered, they made a rush. Boom! went the thunder medicine, and a man fell. Arrows flew and more of the Blackfeet dropped. The rest kept on and overpowered and killed all the Crees. One of the victors, a young man, secured the thunder instrument and everything else that its carrier had on him.

Oh, how proud they were. How glad, and yet, how afraid! They had in their hands the thunder instrument, dread medicine that they did not understand. Some of the party were for leaving it right there. Many of them would not even touch it. But the young man who had captured it was brave. "I shall carry it and all that goes with it," he said, "and if it kills me, why then I die." He picked up the gun, and they started home. It was very heavy, this ancient piece. One other of the party assisted him, and the two carried it in turn.

Arriving home, the young man gave the gun to a very wise old medicine man. There was a rush of all the people to see the strange thing. A whole day was required to display it. Then the medicine man, the chiefs, and the young man who had taken it made a thorough examination of the thing and some

One of the victors, a young man, secured the thunder instrument and everything else that its carrier had on him.

round strange-kind-of-rock balls in a buckskin sack. There was also some dried, fine black paint--powder, of course--in an iron bottle. Thinking it bad medicine, they threw it away.

This gun was very long and heavy. The muzzle of it was bell shaped. It was a flintlock. Its trimmings were highly

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polished brass. There was with it a long, iron forked rest. The old medicine man with the others looking on made a thorough examination of it. He examined it for many days. But he could not find out how to make it thunder. The balls were what made holes in people when it was fired. But what made the balls go? When one was rolled down to the bottom of the barrel, it would simply roll out again when the gun was inverted.

Examining the gun, the old man cocked the hammer on his thumb and bruised it severely. "Ha!" That had something to do with its thundering. He tried it again, this time with the pan shut. Sparks flew when the flint struck the pan, and he jumped and dropped the gun, expecting the thunder to boom. But it didn't. That was all he could do with the gun, just make it spark. It was a great disappointment. But anyhow, the thing was great medicine, a precious thing. The old man rolled it in fine furs and kept it with his other medicines. He tried to dream how to use it, but he could never get the right dream. Every few days he would take it out and examine it all over. Nothing ever happened. And so passed several winters.

Sparks flew when the flint struck the pan, and he jumped and dropped the gun, expecting the thunder to boom.

Yes, several, I know not how many winters passed. Then on a day in the early summer the same young man who took the gun went on another raid into Cree country. He had been named Na-mak-an for taking the first gun. The party had no sooner got well into Cree country when they met a party of Crees. Na-mak-an and his party attacked them and

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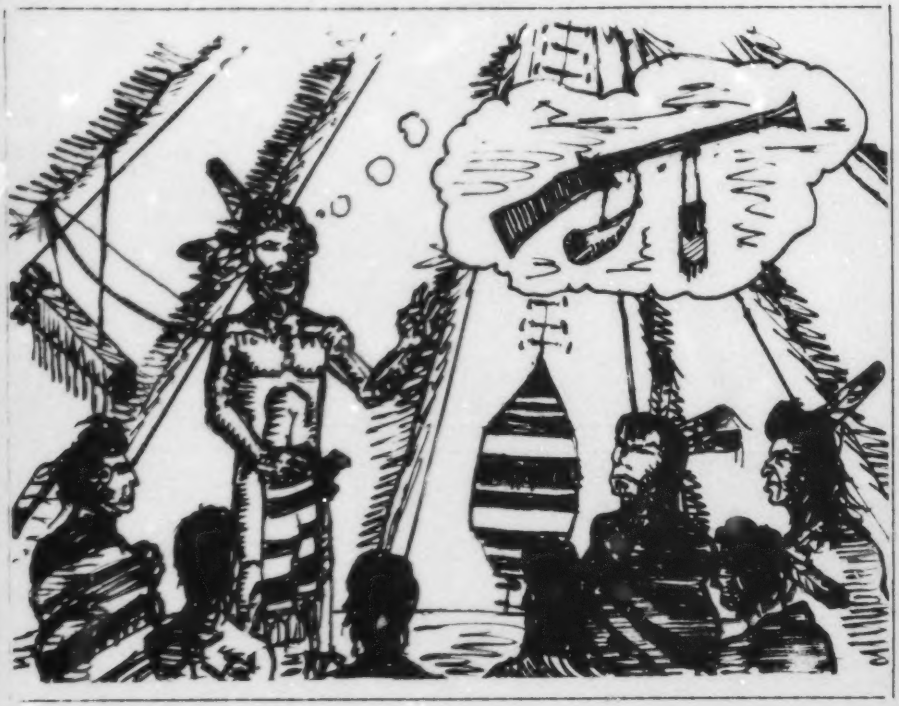
were fired upon by no less than four thunder instruments. They were so surprised--two of their number were killed--that they had hardly sense to turn and run. For some time they just stood and stared, open mouthed. They never moved until the Crees charged. Then they did run and travelled back to the Blackfeet country as fast as they could.

The news they brought was again almost unbelievable. It struck terror to the hearts of all the people. With four thunder instruments the Crees could do as they would with the Blackfeet. Again the chief called a big council, and the men talked and talked. "If we only knew how to use the one thunder instrument we have," a warrior said, "it wouldn't be so bad. Try. Try again, you medicine men, to get a revealing dream about it."

Because of his capture of the gun, Na-mak-an had been made a chief, and now with authority he spoke up,

> "Dreams will not come. We are to the Crees what dead leaves are to the wind. I propose to go make peace with our enemies and learn how to use the thunder instrument we have."



Try! Try again, you medicine men, to get a revealing dream about it.

His words brought instant relief to the council. They cried, "Yes! Yes! Why didn't we think of that before? It is the one thing to do." Then they went their ways after naming those who should go on this peace mission.

Na-mak-an led the party of fifteen. They carried rich presents for the Cree chiefs.

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They brought fine war bonnets, tanned bighorn skins, beautifully porcupine quill embroidered moccasins and bunches of valuable eagle tail feathers. They also brought a large quantity of na-wak-o-sis, a plant the Blackfeet grew for smoking before they got the white man's tobacco.

They went cautiously into Cree country. At last they found the big camp of the tribe and openly approached it. They sang the peace song and made signs for peace. The Cree chiefs, seeing them coming without weapons, met and embraced them. They invited them to the lodges. There they rested and were feasted. Then they distributed the presents they brought. These were not accepted at once. They were laid aside upon the ground. The Cree chiefs counseled together. It was not long however before their talk ended. The head chief spoke to the Blackfeet,

> "We accept your presents. Brothers, we are glad you have come to us this day. It is a good day. The sun is shining and is glad to see us sitting here in friendship instead of fighting to take one another's lives. Return to your people and tell them

They went cautiously into Cree country.

that we too desire peace. But first rest with us while we prepare presents for your chiefs."

So all was well. They remained for some nights in the camp enjoying many feasts and dances. They learned, to their great surprise, that the thunder instruments were

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the medicine of white men. The white skins, said the Crees, had a strange, square, log lodge away eastward on the Assiniboine River. It was from them that they obtained the weapons. They gave fifty beaver skins for each one. Then they showed the Blackfeet the few they had--five in all. They taught them how to load and fire. Best of all, they gave Na-mak-an enough powder and ball for a hundred charges for the weapon he had taken from them. Well satisfied the Blackfeet returned home. Many Cree families went with them for a visit. So was a peace made that lasted for many winters.

Na-mak-an and his men arrived home late in the evening. In the old medicine man's lodge, Na-mak-an took the loud mouthed gun and showed a wondering crowd of chiefs and head warriors just how to use it. He even loaded and fired it outside the lodge. The women and children, and even some men, ran in every direction when it boomed. The old medicine man at once named its different parts. He called the hammer its jaws because they firmly gripped the sparking flint. The pan was named the ear. The ram rod was the throat because it was held in place under the barrel by throat-like brass loops. The

He even loaded and fired it outside the lodge. The women and children, and even some men, ran in every direction when it boomed.

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barrel itself was the loud--or big mouth.

And, strange to say, now that the old medicine man understood the death making instrument, important, revealing dreams came to him about it. His dream medicine, his secret helper, gave him these rules about it: It was never to be taken from its embroidered

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case except to be actually used. It was to be hung outside the lodge every pleasant day before sunrise. It was to be taken inside every evening after sunset. When being taken on a war expedition, on the day before the start, the leader of the war party must carry it completely around the big camp. All his men must follow dressed in their war costumes singing certain songs which the dreams had also revealed, dreams that were sacred to the gun.

War! Ai! Now came war. The Blackfeet had often invaded the country of the Crows, even to the Yellowstone and beyond. They had seen its many rivers, streams, valleys, mountains and plains. All were alive with all kinds of game. In season it was red with sweet berries. They knew that it was a far richer and more kindly country than theirs in the north. They wanted it. They had for countless winters tried to take it. But the Crows had ever managed to hold their own. Now, with this medicine, loud mouthed gun, what might they not do?

The chiefs called a great council and made talk for strong war against the Crows. The warriors all agreed to do it and made preparations for the start. They took

medicine sweat baths and made many prayers and sacrifices to the sun. Then the loud mouthed gun was carried by Na-mak-an in a complete circle of the camp with all the warriors following and singing. Only enough men were left to guard the camp.

Southward they travelled day by day, to Elk River, to Old Man's River, to Belly River, to the River of Many Dead Chiefs, to Little River, to Cut Bank River. At Cut Bank River they found signs of the enemy and halted. Scouts were sent forward on discovery. During their absence Na-mak-an, with his medicine pipe, the loud mouthed gun, and his young man for servant moved away from the party. By himself, in quiet, he prayed to the sun for success against the enemy. He tried to get revealing dreams. He did get them. His secret helper told him that his expedition was to be successful. The servant carried the news to the waiting party and made glad their hearts. They were eager to go on.

The scouts returned after an absence of four nights. They went direct to Na-mak-an in his sleeping-alone place. The leader said to them,

"We bring you good news. The Crows are camped on the next stream to the south." (It was the one that the Blackfeet afterward named the Two Medicine Lodge River.)

The chief asked, "In what shape are they? What is the position of their camp?" The scout answered,

"Their lodges stand at the edge of a wide long grove of cottonwoods in a big wide bottom. Just above the camp is a long high cliff. At the foot of the cliff is a very large impounding place built of drift logs and brush. As we were watching from a distance, the Crows decoyed a big band of buffalo to the cliff. They scared them over it to their death. Those not killed by the fall were unable to get out of the impound and were shot down with bow and arrow."

Na-mak-an said,

"I do not like that big grove of timber. It would be a place of refuge for the Crows. In driving them out of there our loss would be heavy. What kind of country lies below the camp?"

The scout replied,

"It's a wide, long, level bottom with a spring creek flowing through. At the lower end of it and to the north is a low pass with a high butte in it. On either side are coulees and broken hills."

Na-mak-an said,

"Ha! That is better. There will we fight them. A part of us will hide in the breaks. With a few men I will lie on top of the butte with the loud mouthed gun. Still others shall attack the camp and retreat to decoy the Crows to the butte."

With that he gave orders for the advance as soon as the sun should set.

It was the next day. The sun was well up. Women in the Crow camp were everywhere busy drying buffalo meat, tanning leather, and softening buckskins. Men were making new arrows and flint arrow heads. Everything was very quiet. Then suddenly, a couple of men came running into camp from below. They cried,

"Ho! The enemy comes. A big crowd of the enemy is coming up the spring bottom. They are loudly singing

their war song. The Blackfeet are coming."

The alarm spread quickly to the very upper edge of the camp. The Crow warriors, every one of them, grabbed up bow, quiver, and shield. Many put on their war bonnets. They rushed down around the point of the grove. About fifty of the Blackfeet advanced. The Crows laughed as they sprang to meet them. Fifty men against the whole Crow camp. What fools they were. Not one of them should escape.

But the Blackfeet had calculated well their approach. They had not come too near. They were just as good runners as were the Crows. They turned and ran, ran as fast as they could, down the bottom, up in the pass, and to the top of the butte. The Crows ran after them. They gained upon them toward the last and swarmed up the side of the butte. Na-mak-an with the big mouthed gun loaded with four balls resting in its fingers took good aim at the thick of the crowd and pulled the trigger. Whoom! It thundered and vomited heavy smoke. Five of the enemy--dead and crippled--fell. The others, all those hundreds of warriors, halted and started questioning one another. They could not

They were just as good runners as the Crows. They turned and ran, ran as fast as they could.

understand what happened. They believed--as was afterward learned--that thunder itself and a flash of lightning had struck their comrades.

The chief cried, "Advance! Advance! It will not happen again." Again they made a

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rush even to short bow range of the top. They used their bows. The air was full of arrows. The Blackfeet fired arrows down at them, and men fell on both sides. Na-mak-an waited alone in front of his men at great risk to himself. He did not flinch. He waited a little longer and then fired. Three men fell.

This time the Crows plainly saw what was killing them. The Blackfeet had thunder and lightning medicine. They had the power of the spirits themselves. With hoarse cries of fright they turned and fled--fled for their lives. Out from the coulees poured the great body of Blackfeet warriors and chased them up the flat, overtaking and dispatching many. They did not follow them clear to their camp. They had no mind to fight them in their grove. Soon they went back down the flat to join Na-mak-an and the men with him. All together they went over to the river to rest and eat.

That very night the Crows fled southward and never again did they set up their lodges on the Two Medicine Lodge River. Na-mak-an and his men leisurely followed them to Birch Creek, to the Teton, to the Missouri. They drove them across that big stream. From time

The air was full of arrows. The Blackfeet fired arrows down at them, and men fell on both sides.

to time on the way they frightened them with the thunder of the loud mouthed gun. At the Missouri, well satisfied with what they had done, the Blackfeet turned and went home to get the camp and occupy the country they had taken.

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That was just the beginning of raids with the loud mouthed gun. It was carried again and again against the Crows. They were driven to the Yellowstone. It terrorized the Flatheads, the Kootenai, the Assiniboines, and other tribes. It was great medicine. Then one day when taken out to war and fired in battle, the barrel burst. Na-mak-an was seriously injured. The fight was won anyway. As soon as the chief could travel, the party went home. Again the old medicine man took the gun. He said,

> "It can never thunder again. But it is still strong medicine. I shall keep it as long as I live, and I want it buried with me."

As he said, so it was done.

Remaining friendly with the Crees, the Blackfeet soon got other guns from them. With these weapons they held what they had gained. Long afterward, even after all their enemies became equally well armed, they held and still hold the great country they gained with the loud mouthed gun. Ai, my son, it was great medicine.

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NOTES

James Willard Schultz lived with the Blackfeet during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He saw the last of the great Buffalo herds disappear and the forcing of the Blackfeet onto smaller and smaller reservations. He wrote many stories about the Blackfeet. "The Loud Mouthed Gun" is in WHY GONE THOSE TIMES (ed. by Eugene Lee Silliman, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1974). Jon Reyhner edited "The Loud Mouthed Gun" for use by students on the Blackfeet Reservation.

The Blackfeet Reservation is located in north-central Montana on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains next to Glacier National Park. To learn more about the Blackfeet, three books are suggested: THE BLACKFEET: RAIDERS OF THE NORTHWESTERN PLAINS by John C. Ewers, University of Oklahoma Press, 1982; BLACKFOOT LODGE TALES by George Bird Grinnell, University of Nebraska Press, 1962 (This is a reprint of the 1892 edition); and THE OLD NORTH TRAIL: LIFE, LEGENDS AND RELIGION OF THE BLACKFEET INDIANS by Walter McClintock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1968 (This is a reprint of the 1910 edition).

The Heart Butte Bilingual Program has published a number of other stories for children about the Blackfeet including "Famine Winter", "Quest for Courage", "Natosi: Strong Medicine", "Sik-ki-mi", and "Little Blaze and the Buffalo Jump". These stories span the history of the Blackfeet from the time before they had horses and guns till their first contacts with White-men in

the middle of the nineteenth century. They are available from the non-profit Council for Indian Education, Box 31215, Billings, MT 59107.

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